Comprehensive Design Plan
Summary

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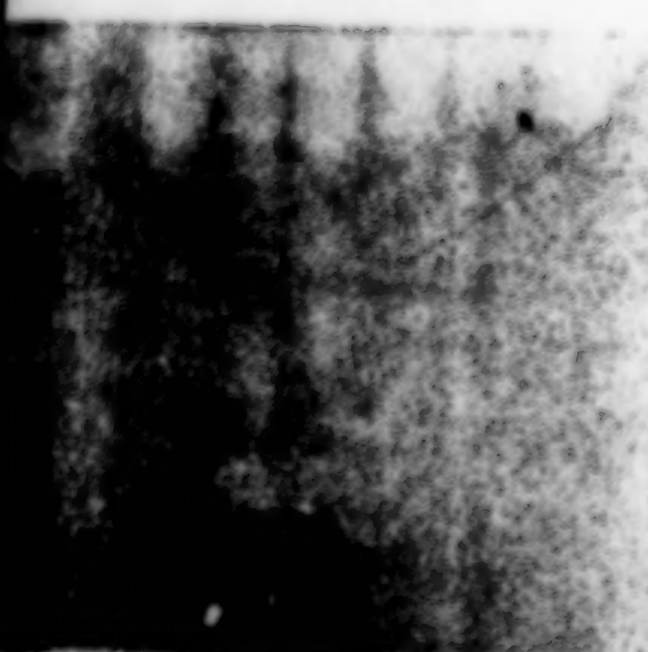

Comprehensive Design Plan
Summary

The story of the White House is the story of America. In its rooms and gardens and ceremonial spaces can be read the development of the nation, from the founding of Washington in 1791 to its sacking by the British in 1814, through the Civil War, two world wars, the Great Depression, and many other foreign and domestic crises. Within its walls Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered his "Fireside Chats." Its gleaming façade has provided a symbolic backdrop for suffragettes, freedom riders and anti-war protesters; on its sloping south lawn children gather for Easter egg rolls and to watch the lighting of the National Christmas Tree.

In good times and bad, the White House is "America's Home," the most potent symbol of the nation's democratic ideals. It is the only home of a head of state regularly open free to the public, offering ordinary citizens a glimpse of how their leaders live and work. Instead of a remote architectural monument, it is a living symbol of government's accessibility, to the extent that we routinely speak of it as having moods, attitudes and distinguishing features. The White House is said to possess "dignity" and "stature," to appear "concerned" or "jubilant," to have a voice that "declares," "defends" or offers "no comment."

And yet for all its symbolic importance, the White House is also a 200-year-old building forced to play an extraordinary range of roles: home and office of the president, historic site, museum, tourist attraction, civic centerpiece, national symbol and world stage. The White House is the headquarters of the executive branch of government, where the most critical political decisions are made, and the ceremonial center of the nation, which communicates America's values to the world. More than one million people visit it each year, and millions more would like to.

In accommodating this rush of competing demands, White House planning has often been piecemeal and ad hoc. Its utilities and other basic services are out of date. The pressroom, an international communications hub, resembles a set from a 1950s television program. Presidential staff and other participants must

often stand two and three deep at meetings for lack of adequate space. There is little room to store furniture and equipment for official events, or to park cars for daily business.

For the most part, Americans are unaware of these problems. On the evening news or the front page of the morning paper the white columns still gleam, the chandeliers still sparkle and the lawns and shrubs remain impeccably groomed. What more could they ask for? Or more precisely, why should they spend hundreds of millions of dollars fixing something that doesn't appear broken?

The answer to this question, of course, is because it's the White House, our house, the most famous house in the world.

The *Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House and President's Park* preserves the historic integrity of both, while accommodating the needs of the presidency in the 21st century. If approved, the plan will make the White House work better by modernizing its infrastructure, expanding its meeting and storage space, and adding facilities for the press. It will create underground parking for White House staff, and indoor recreation space for the first family. It will make touring the White House safer, more enjoyable and more informative by providing a new visitor center featuring exhibits, films, interactive displays and special presentations.

The *Comprehensive Design Plan* has been prepared by the National Park Service, with the assistance of other federal agencies and numerous private organizations and consultants. It is the first comprehensive plan for the White House, distilled from dozens of technical reports and alternatives. It offers practical suggestions for maintaining the White House as both the home of the president and the seat of government in an era of political fragmentation and bewildering technological change. It reflects a broad consensus that preserving the historic integrity of the White House and its setting is above politics and party, and that careful long-range planning serves not a particular president but the institution of the presidency and the interests of the nation.

Plan for Washington in 1791, showing the physical and symbolic relationships between the President's House and the Capitol
William Robinson (after Andrew Ellicott) Plan of the City of Washington, New York: I. Reid, 1792

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When George Washington and Pierre L'Enfant laid out President's Park in 1791, they envisioned it as the setting for the White House and the centerpiece of the new capital. Covering 82 acres from H Street to Constitution Avenue between 15th and 17th Streets, it was the first parcel acquired for the federal city, and is still listed as "Reservation Number 1" in the land records of the District of Columbia. In addition to the White House, the park includes the Old Executive Office Building, Lafayette Park, the Treasury Building, the Ellipse and numerous smaller parks, monuments and memorials.

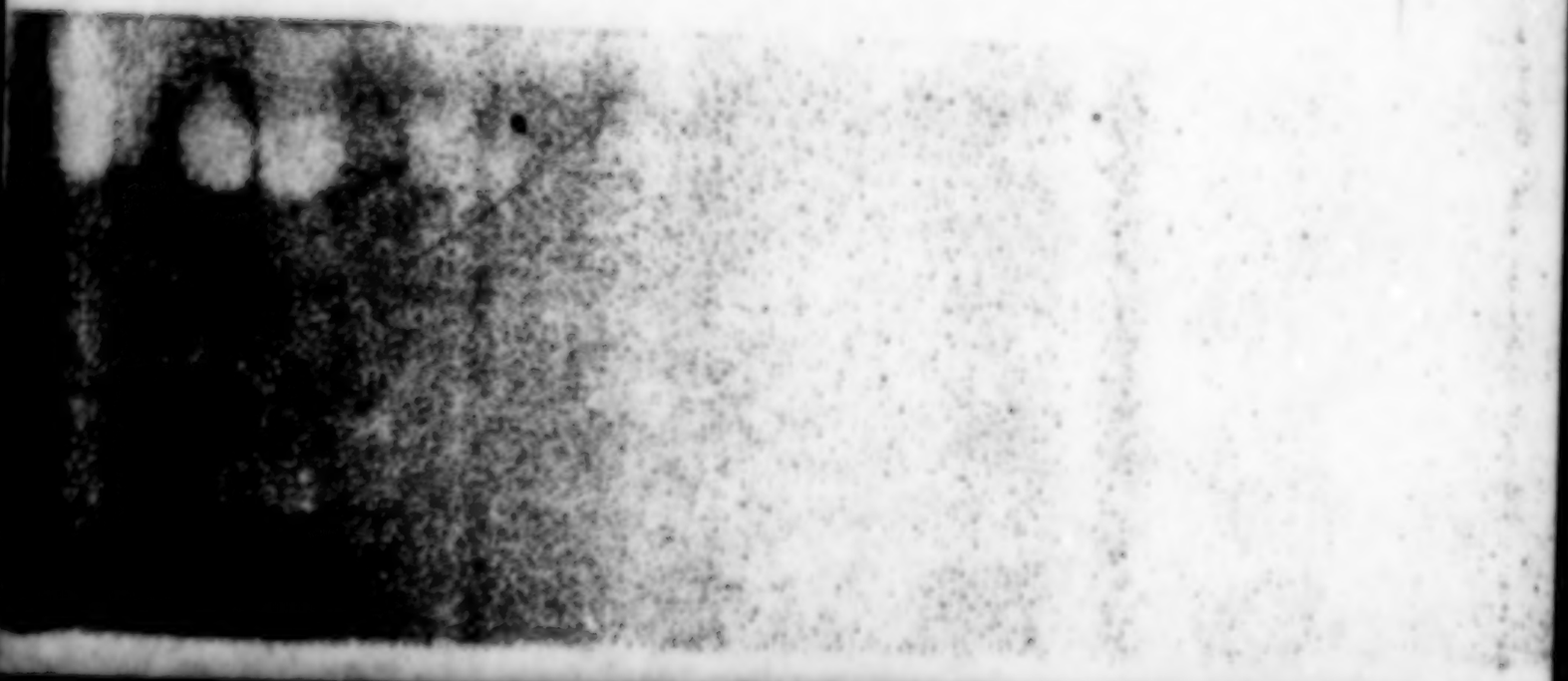
Preserving this priceless cultural and symbolic landscape, within the context of a modern city and a modern presidency, is the broad goal of the *Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House and President's Park*.

As the first comprehensive plan, it replaces the piecemeal and reactive approach of the past with a coherent and integrated strategy for the future. No more quick fixes that turn out to be more costly and cumbersome than permanent ones.

The plan recommends that President's Park once again be a pedestrian precinct where visitors won't have to dodge cars and delivery trucks in order to reach the grounds. Wherever possible, new structures will be placed underground so as not to disturb the historic landscape.

The White House is also a priceless educational resource that should be accessible and inspiring to all. This goal can be achieved with better exhibits and public programs, located in a new visitor center that provides not only a ticket and a brochure, but also a compelling introduction to the White House and its place in American history.

Finally, the White House and President's Park are part of Washington, precious open space in the middle of a dense urban environment. They offer dramatic views of the Capitol, the Potomac River and the magnificent Americas beyond. These views have inspired American presidents for 200 years, and they must be preserved as reminders of the White House's relationship to the other branches of government, to the city around it and to the nation as a whole.

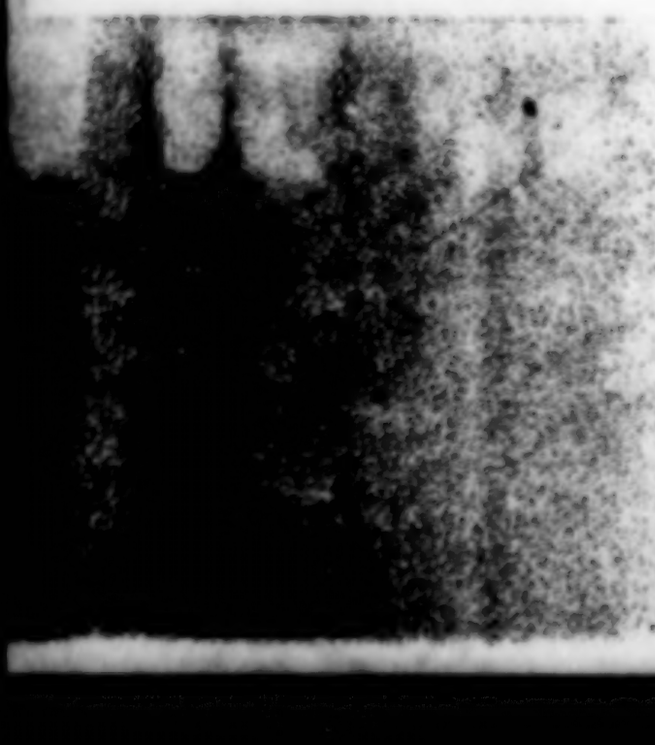


Every president since John Adams has left his personal mark on the White House. Some have redecorated rooms or acquired important paintings and sculptures; others have planted trees and shrubs or otherwise modified the landscape. Harry Truman added a balcony. Dwight Eisenhower installed a putting green. The Kennedy children had a stable for their ponies, and Amy Carter built a tree house in a sprawling Afton cedar. Each addition in its own way was an attempt to make the White House less like a museum and more like a home.

As a home, the White House has a number of shortcomings. Within its relentless formality, no indoor recreation space exists where members of the first family can relax at the end of a hectic day. Nor does the house have sufficient storage space to accommodate its innumerable state functions. Imagine hosting four or five diplomatic receptions a week, and each time having to hire a moving company to transport the tables, chairs and stages to the house, set them up, then take them back to a warehouse until the next event. That's the way things work at the White House, and it is confused and costly. Closets, corridors and driveways overflow with furniture and equipment, as though the staff were having a tag sale. No modern hotel would put up with such chaos, yet the White House has been doing it for years because it has no choice.

For these reasons, the *Comprehensive Design Plan* is recommending modest changes within the White House, mainly the addition of indoor recreation space to make the house more livable. This new area, a combination den, gym and entertainment space, might be located in renovated space inside or underground, to the north of the executive residence.

The convoys of trucks and vans that regularly jam the White House grounds would be redirected to loading docks beneath the New Executive Office Building, with deliveries to the White House



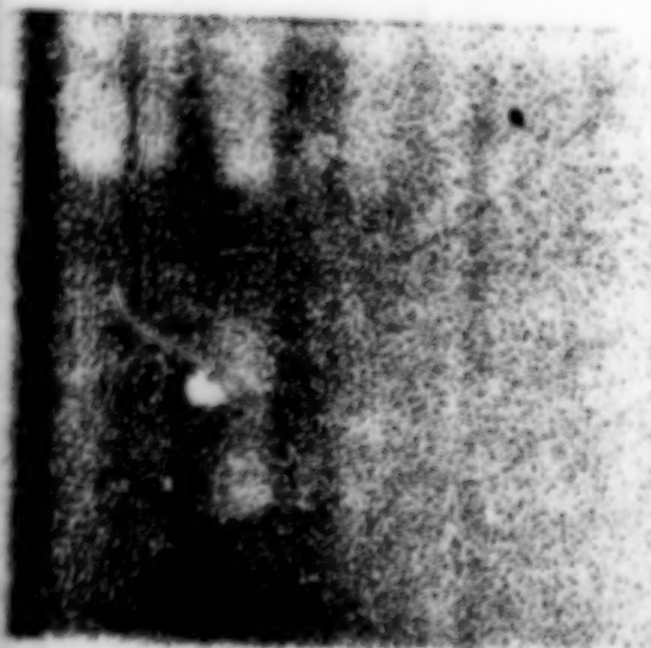
and adjacent buildings by small vehicles similar to golf carts. Additional storage space beneath Pennsylvania Avenue would relieve the pressure of the nonstop special events – from state dinners to Easter egg rolls – that overwhelm daily life at the White House. Greater efficiency would translate into substantial savings over time.

But the White House is also the quintessential homebuilder, with a large presidential apartment upstairs over the national shops. Like the residence, the business side of the White House needs to catch up with the late 20th century. The main problems are a shortage of meeting space, inadequate facilities for the White House press corps – now numbering in the thousands – and the glut of cars, trucks and delivery vans that take over President's Park.

The *Comprehensive Design Plan* recommends additional meeting rooms for the White House staff beneath West Executive Avenue. This new space would reduce the use of historic rooms in neighboring buildings, which are typically small, technologically inadequate and acoustically inferior. The U.S. Capitol recently solved its space problems in a similar way.

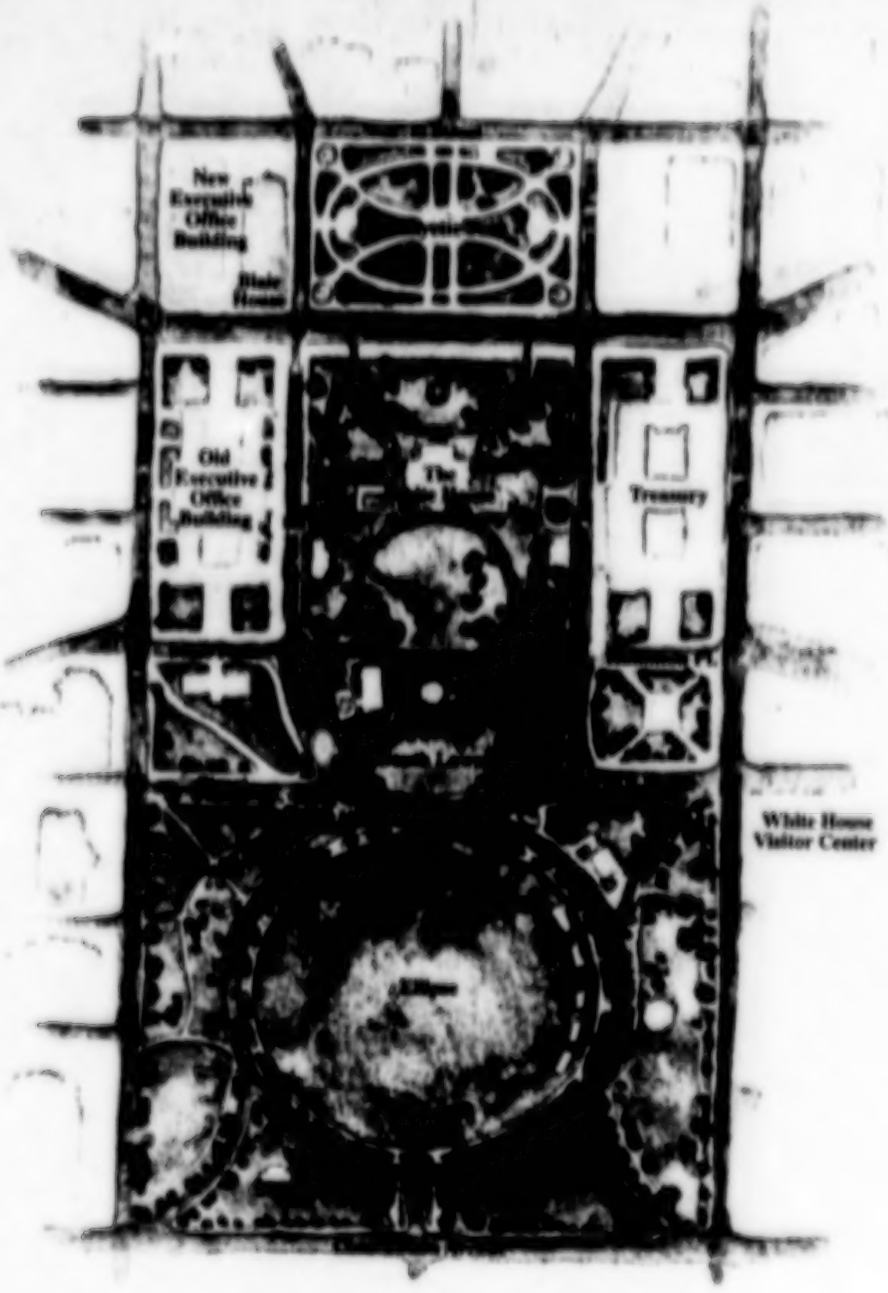
The news media would continue to occupy the first floor of the west colonnade, as well as a new facility beneath the adjacent West Wing. Other containing the presidential briefing room, interview rooms and additional space for television crews, photographers and White House correspondents. For the first time, space for visiting journalists would be available as well.

To reclaim President's Park from the automobile, the plan proposes two dramatic additions: a two-story, 280-car parking garage beneath Pennsylvania Avenue, and an 850-car garage under the Ellipse. The first would be for presidential motorcades, visiting dignitaries and senior White House staff, the second for staff during the week and possibly the public on weekends and holidays.



Existing Conditions

The new plan will reconnect the spaces of President's Park



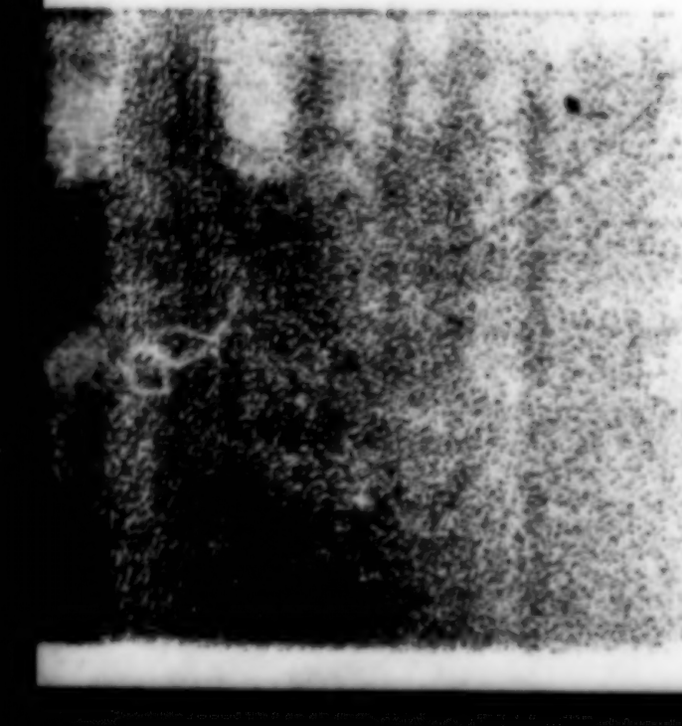
Five days a week thousands of people line up along E Street and East Executive Park to tour the White House. In the spring and summer the lines start forming at 4 A.M., and many visitors wait for hours to walk through the Red Room, and the East Room, and the elegant State Dining Room, where the President entertains visiting heads of state.

For many of the 1.2 million people who cross the threshold each year, the White House tour is the highlight of their stay in Washington, the single most anticipated and most memorable event. "The real highlight of [my] trip was just to be allowed in the White House," wrote one visitor. "The [visit] gave me a great sense of history coming alive," noted another.

But some leave frustrated by the brevity of the tour, or the sketchiness of the information, or the lack of opportunity to pause and reflect on a particularly compelling object or view. Thousands more are turned away because the tours are full.

Although the White House can never accommodate everyone who wants to visit it, or satisfy the public's desire for a behind-the-scenes glimpse of its government in action, the public tours can clearly be more informative and inspiring than they are. For this reason, the *Comprehensive Design Plan* proposes major changes in the visitation program.

The most important change is expanding the existing White House Visitor Center in the Commerce Building to include a museum, four video theaters and new exhibits on the history of the White House and the American presidency. The current exhibits are static and disconnected, providing bits and pieces of information but no overall picture. The new ones will be computerized and interactive. Click on "Gilbert Stuart" and learn the fascinating story of his famous portrait of



George Washington and its dramatic rescue by Dolley Madison's servants which spurred the collection of White House china, or over Monticello, the LBJ Ranch and other presidential sites around the country.

The exhibits will be supplemented by interpretive talks by National Park Service rangers and invited guests. A former chief of staff might reminisce about the president he's served or the White House chef might re-create a course for a state dinner. Public interest in the gardens, architecture and furnishings of the White House is extremely high, and could be the basis for seminars or a lecture series. Such presentations give history a human face while raising the general level of excitement about restoring the home of the president.

The new visitor center will create space for the docents to work, to prepare and hold discussions. The museum will expand its relationships with schools in the District of Columbia and, in addition, with students in foreign countries, for whom the White House is perhaps the most recognizable American building.

For those who want more detailed information about the White House and its history, the visitor center will function as a miniature research library, providing books, tapes, maps, photographs and related materials. Selections from the White House's 40,000 piece collection of paintings, furniture and decorative arts will also be on exhibit.

All future White House tours will start from the new visitor center instead of outside in the heat or rain. After viewing the exhibits and watching a brief orientation film in one of the visitor theaters, visitors will proceed to a moving sidewalk that will carry them underneath 15th and E streets to the White House tours. This connector will be illuminated by skylights and designed to recall the architecture of the White House. Visitors will proceed directly to the East Entrance to the White House, ready to see the real thing.

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The underground entrance between the centre tower and the Main Hall, with a moving sidewalk and displays of historic photographs and drawings. The new visitor centre illustrates with realistic models, animations, exhibits and video displays.

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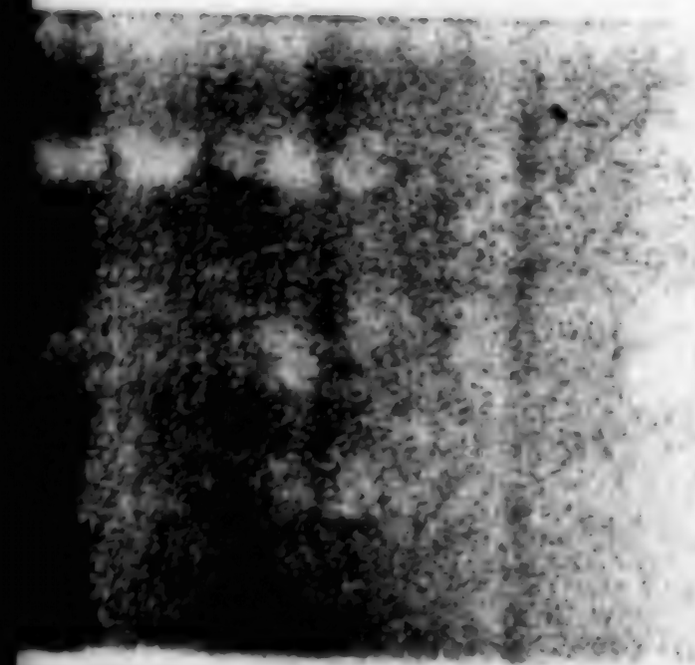

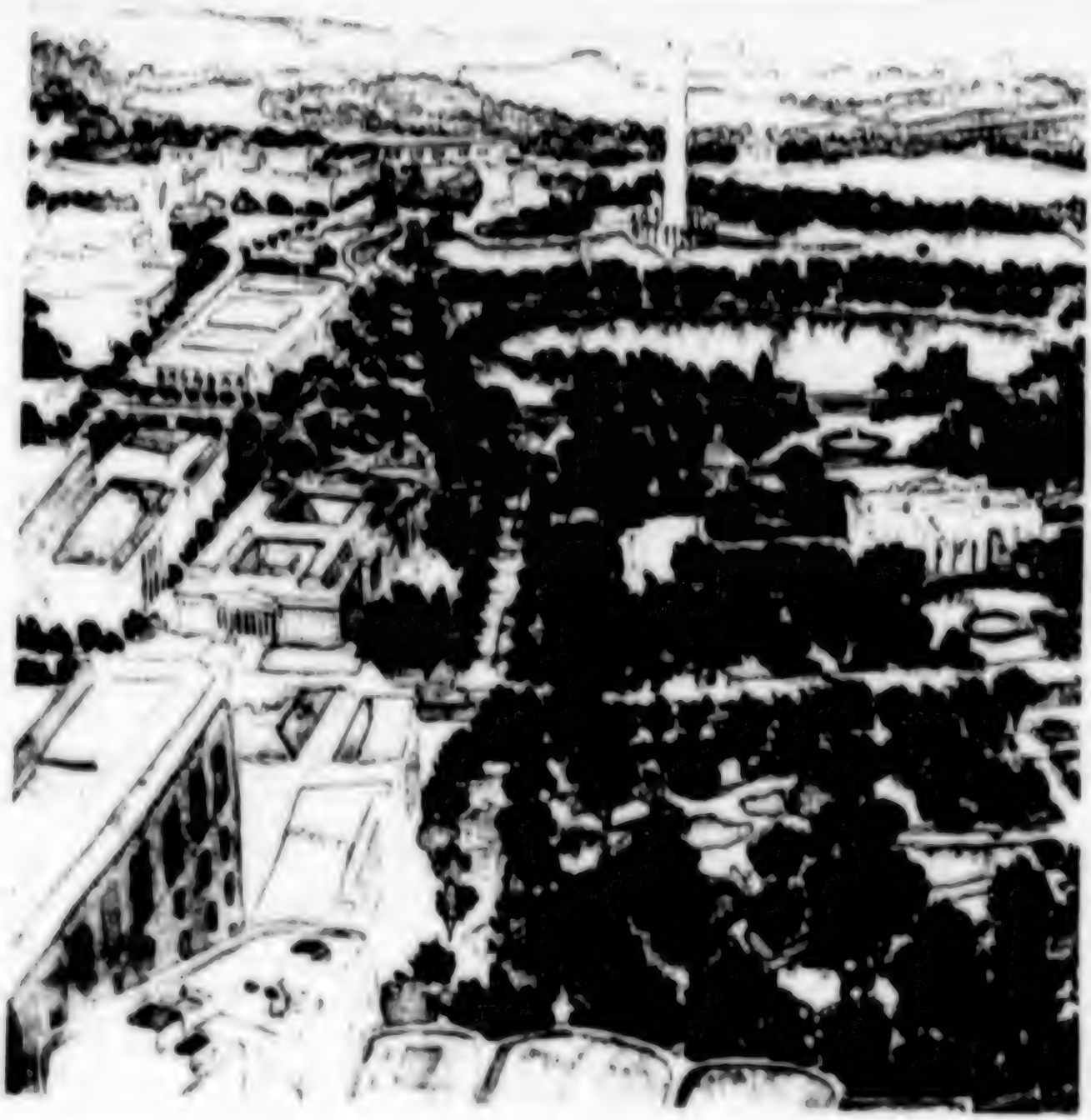

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President's Park was created by some of the finest planners and landscape architects in the world, beginning with Pierre L'Enfant and Thomas Jefferson, and including Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

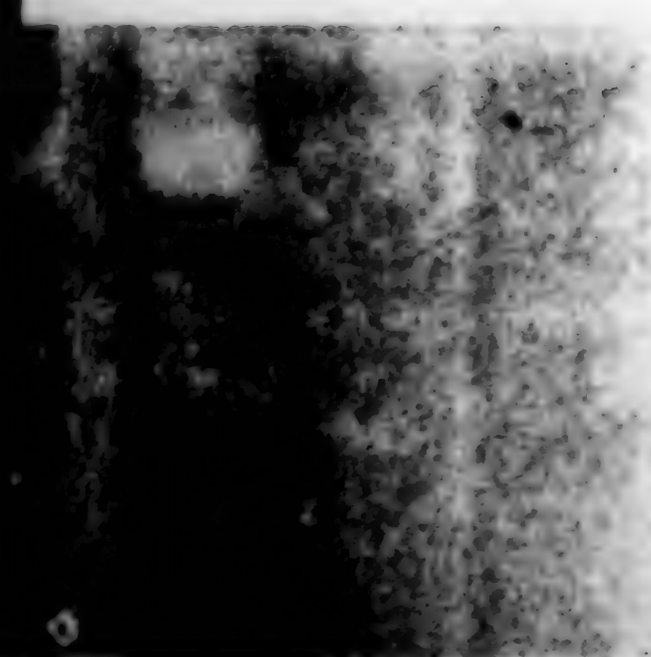
Pierre L'Enfant established the framework for the park, locating the new "President's House" on a low rise overlooking a series of terraces and gardens that would then connect visually toward the Potomac. The sites were majestic, and with the addition of the Washington Monument and the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials it evolved into one of the world's great symbolic landscapes. No American president can go to sleep without being reminded of his obligations to history.

Thomas Jefferson attempted to make L'Enfant's grand design more democratic by calling for a stone fence around the White House and turning President's Square – now Lafayette Park – into a public space. Within the fence he added serpentine paths, vegetable gardens and hundreds of trees, arranged in sidewalk rows around the White House.

In his 1851 plan, Andrew Jackson Downing converted the low marshy area south of the White House into a series of picturesque ponds and walkways encircling a "mall, for parade ground. The parade ground became the Ellipse and eventually the grand axis and ceremonial space that we enjoy today.

The 1901 Olmsted Plan, still the guide for all landscape work within the White House fence, reaffirmed L'Enfant's long vistas to the north and south. It was also the first plan to use trees and shrubs for security and privacy, a practice that continues today.

A major goal of the Comprehensive Design Plan is to preserve and enhance this design legacy, starting with an update of the



1935 Olmsted Plan. Like the White House itself, the Olmsted Plan has not been renovated for over 50 years. Some historic vistas in Lafayette Park and the Ellipse have been obscured, maintenance procedures are inconsistent, no guide for the future exists. A new comprehensive landscape plan will correct these problems.

Besides providing a magnificent natural setting for the White House, President's Park is also a horticultural sampler in the romantic tradition. "My object is to form a collection of all the trees that will grow in Washington," wrote Downing, "... to form a public museum of living trees and shrubs." Every president since Jefferson has planted commemorative trees and shrubs on the White House grounds. The *Comprehensive Design Plan* calls for continuing this "public museum" tradition, with all vulnerable significant specimens that have been lost or damaged, such as American elms, replaced with new stock from National Park Service nurseries.

A complementary archaeological survey will identify and inventory the significant sites within the park, which range from prehistoric settlements to the remains of pre-Revolutionary farms and Civil War encampments. This information will be made available to scholars and the public, probably through programs and exhibits at the expanded White House Visitor Center.

The existing monuments and memorials in President's Park will be maintained in a manner appropriate to their important setting, but new ones will be discouraged. Memorials represent the interests of specific groups at specific times, while the White House and President's Park belong to the nation. That is why monuments to individual presidents have not been placed on the grounds, with the exception of a statue of Thomas Jefferson on the north lawn, which was moved to the Capitol during the Grant administration.

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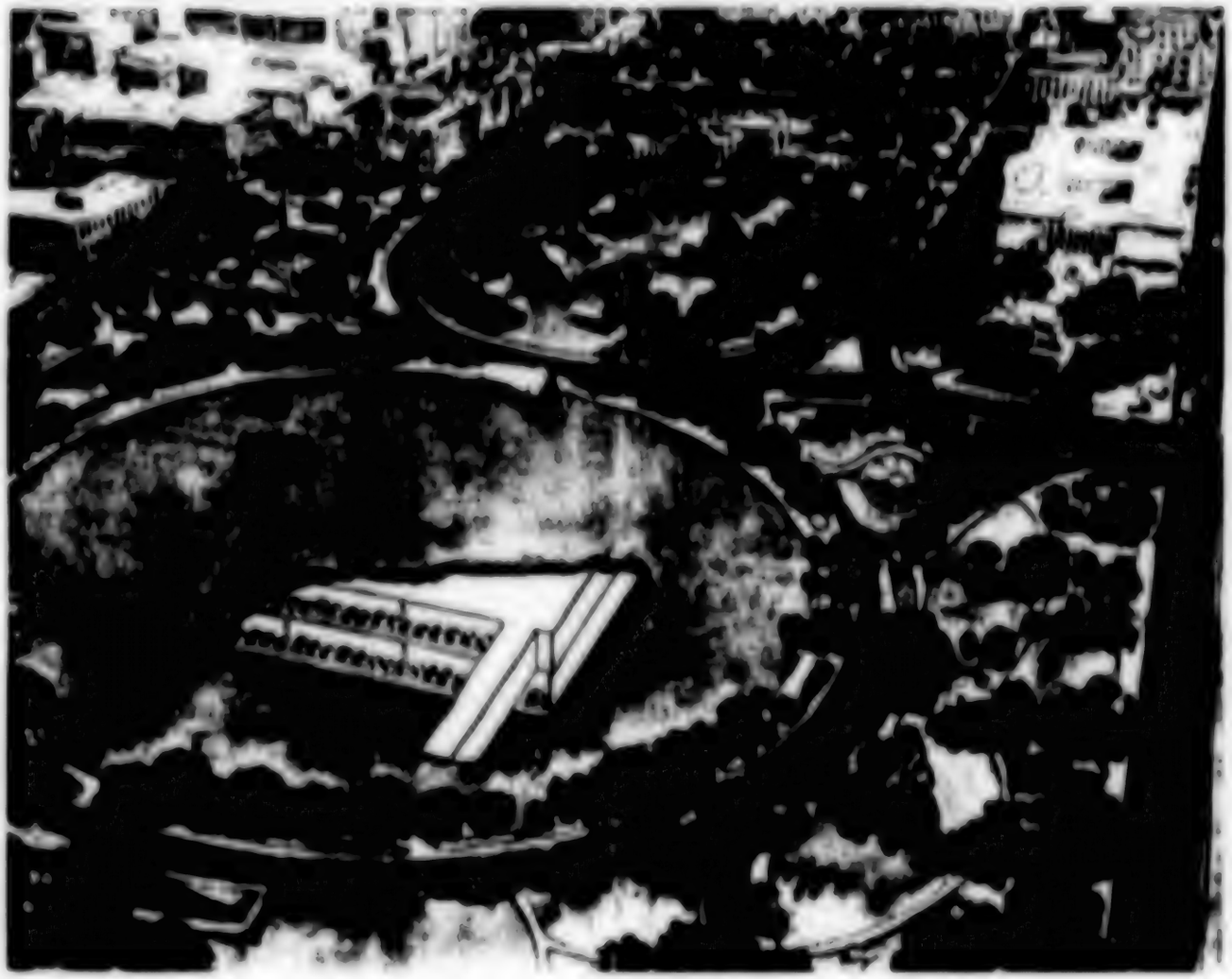
The White House and President's Park are symbols of the nation and centerpieces of the original Washington walking district. Both are the historic districts, have monuments and memorials, and each state national historic sites. The challenge is to strengthen the connections between park and city while preserving the integrity of the individual elements.

The major threat to the integrity of President's Park is traffic. Broadway cuts the landscape into separate and unequal pieces, fracturing the elegant southern that George Washington and Pierre L'Enfant originally envisioned. Cars and buses terrorize pedestrians and turn public space into parking lots. Even certain sights, President's Park appears to be mainly bumpers and hubcaps.

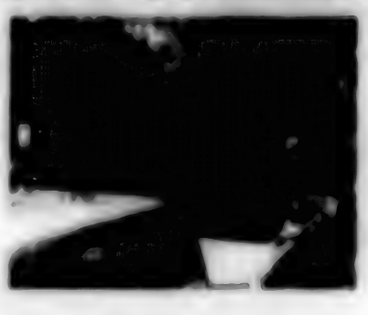
Eliminating traffic within President's Park is a long-term goal of the Comprehensive Design Plan. The proposed garages beneath Pennsylvania Avenue and the Ellipse will replace all most of the parked cars, creating a more pastoral setting around the White House. State, Hamilton, Jackson and Madison Places will remain closed to private vehicles. But the future of 15 Street is cloudier. The plan recommends that it continue as a two-lane, cobbled thoroughfare. A long tunnel-like garden would separate the public lane from the restricted lane leading to the White House. Additional landscaping and decorative paving might further set off 15 Street's importance in President's Park.

At the same time, the plan recognizes that severe traffic congestion in downtown Washington may require additional measures. Should 15 Street be taken for traffic, different lane configurations. The Urban Land Institute recommends a crosswalk connecting this and other options.



The design of Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and Lafayette Park is currently outside this plan. The block has been closed to cars and trucks – but not pedestrians – since the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. With help from citizens and consultants, the National Park Service developed a design to convert the block into a landscaped pedestrian mall. The design is complete, but not yet approved. Once approved, it will be folded into the comprehensive plan.

The Ellipse is among the most used areas of the park, a place for games and jogging and a handy illustration of the American way of life for presidents to point out to foreign dignitaries. Presidents have enjoyed escorting visiting heads of state to the South Portico to watch a softball game within sight of the White House. But the Ellipse has also been abused by too many festivals and too many parked cars. In the spring it is muddy; in the summer, a dusty brown field with a fringe of candy wrappers and empty beer cans. An underground steam line runs through its center, killing all the grass above it. Compared to the manicured lushness of the White House grounds, the Ellipse seems an afterthought.



The proposed underground garage will eliminate the surface parking problem, leaving Downing's original "parade ground" free for soccer, softball and kite flying. But some restrictions will be placed on special events so that the Ellipse won't be ruined by its own popularity. The National Park Service and civic groups will resolve on what these restrictions should be – most likely smaller events of shorter duration that fit the historic character of the park. The northeast corner of the Ellipse has been designated a special events place with all necessary technical support, while existing roadways within will be converted to pedestrian paths. First Amendment activities will continue unchanged.

The bench and concrete vaults parked solid along 15th and 17th Streets will be relocated. Although this will cost the District

of Columbia and the southern mouth, it will reduce visual clutter and enhance the experience of President's Park.

To further integrate city and park, eight new gateways will be constructed around the perimeter of the site. These will not be security checkpoints but low-key ceremonial entrances welcoming visitors to a special neighborhood. Each will have a map and possibly a touch-screen monitor listing events within President's Park and central Washington.

It took six years of hard work to put together the *Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House and President's Park*. It will take another 20 years and $300 million to implement it. That is a long time and a lot of money, unless one compares it to the cost of doing nothing. Nothing is more expensive than inertia. The issue is not a cosmetic makeover of the White House and its surroundings, but ensuring that the White House remains the functioning center of American government in the 21st century.

The *Comprehensive Design Plan* will be implemented in five-year intervals, using a combination of public and private funds. The National Park Service, which administers the White House and President's Park, will seek annual appropriations from Congress to carry out the federal portions of the plan. It will also draft an agreement whereby all federal agencies involved with the White House coordinate future construction and development projects with the *Comprehensive Design Plan*.

A private campaign, directed by a nonprofit organization, might raise money for a specific project, such as the new visitor center and museum. Other opportunities for joint ventures between the White House and various institutional partners – news organizations, foundations, historical associations – may also arise.

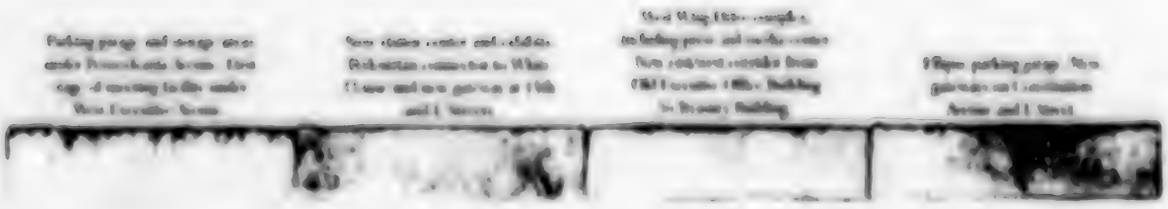
Phase I of the plan will involve constructing the parking garage and storage areas beneath Pennsylvania Avenue, plus the first steps of the new meeting and conference facility under West Executive Avenue. Remaining cars and vans from President's Park [illegible] old first step in freestanding it, which the new meeting and storage spaces will enable the interior areas of the White House. Improvements to the Ellipse and E Street are also included in this phase.

Phase II will focus on designing the new White House Visitor Center in the Commerce Building, including interactive

exhibits, orchestral programs, an underground connector to the White House and a new gateway at F and 15th Streets.

Phase III will concentrate on completing the West Wing Hotel complex, including the new press and media center. Underground pedestrian and delivery corridors connecting the White House with the Old Executive Office Building and the Treasury Building are also scheduled for this phase.

Phase IV will include constructing the Ellipse parking garage and new entrances to President's Park on Constitution Avenue and E Street.


Parking garage and orange area under Pennsylvania Avenue. New sign directing traffic under West Executive Avenue
New visitor center and exhibits. Pedestrian connector to White House and new gateway at 15th and F Streets
West Wing Hotel complex, including press and media center. New underground corridor from Old Executive Office Building to Treasury Building
Ellipse parking garage. New gateways on Constitution Avenue and E Street

The White House is the most powerful symbol of America's democratic ideals, a three-dimensional expression of its fundamental principles and values. It is also America's public face, the one it shows to the rest of the world.

Fifty years have passed since the leg of Margaret Truman's grand piano broke through the ceiling of the Lincoln Sitting Room, and the family was forced to move across Pennsylvania Avenue to Blair House while the "President's House" was renovated from cellar to roof. Nine presidents have occupied the White House since then, and it is still essentially a 1950s residence. Problems have come and go, pile up like logs behind a dam, until the quick fixes no longer work. It is time for a different approach.

The *Comprehensive Design Plan* will make the White House more efficient, livable and economical to operate. It will provide the space and the services that are taken for granted in modern office buildings, but that are currently lacking in the heart of American government. The plan will protect the White House's historic setting and dramatic views, while increasing the enjoyment of the millions of people who visit it.

In addition to a ticket and a brochure, visitors will get an overview of the history and the symbolism of the house. Students will have new opportunities to learn how the executive branch relates to the rest of the American government, using the latest electronic technology. The lines will be shorter, the approaches more attractive, the introductory information more precise and immediately useful.

And everyone will get a chance to experience President's Park as it was meant to be — not a collection of fragments linked only by service roads and parking lots, but a continuous and

coherent landscape in which individual historical elements come together to form a dignified and memorable whole.

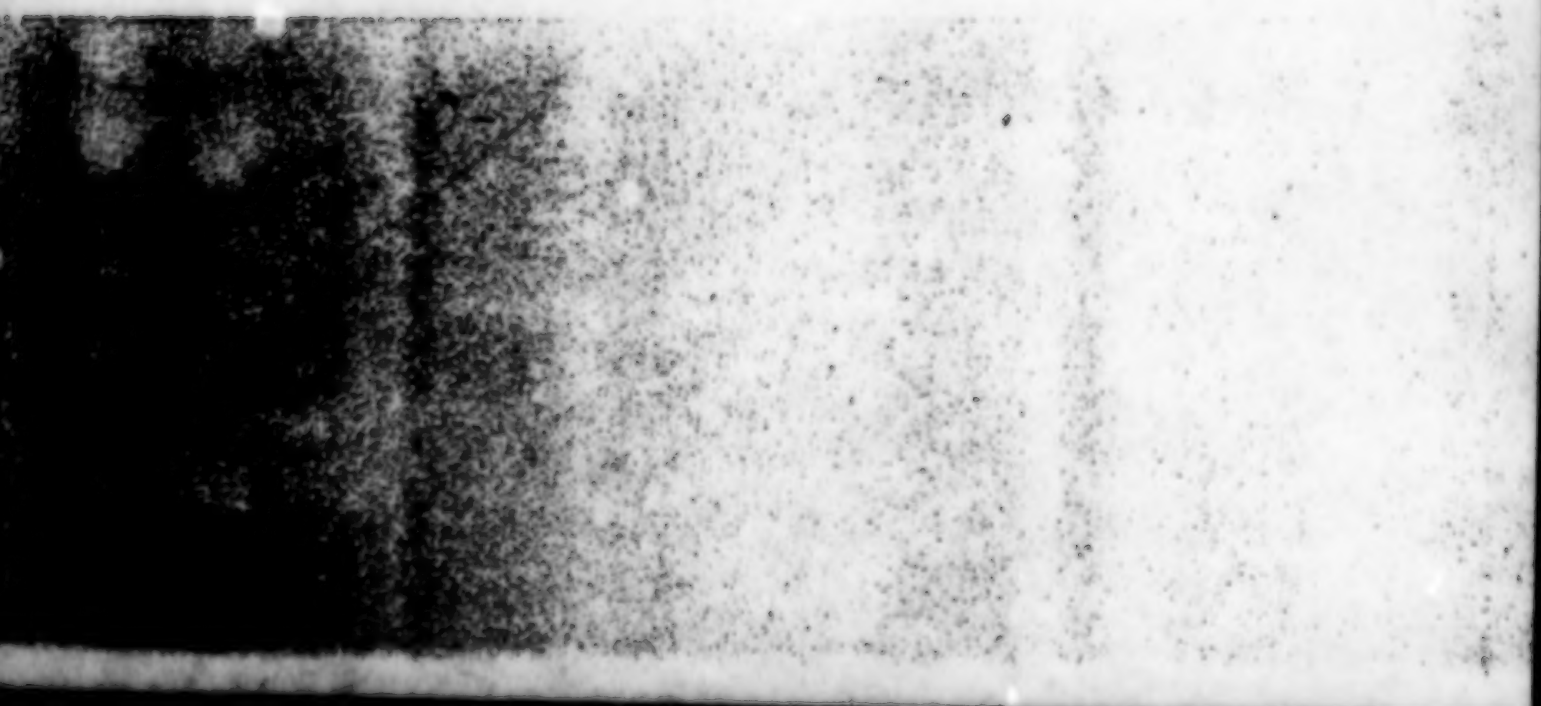
The *Comprehensive Design Plan* provides an opportunity to shape the future of the White House instead of trusting it to chance. "[History] clearly shows that we arrive at catastrophe by failing to meet situations," said Eleanor Roosevelt, "by failing to act where we should act. . . . [The] opportunity passes and the next situation always is more difficult than the last one."

The *Comprehensive Design Plan* represents a consensus of hundreds of planners, architects, historians and ordinary citizens about how to protect and enhance one of the preeminent symbols of our democracy. Its priorities are clear: to make the White House more livable for first families, more functional for its staff, more informative for visitors and more inspiring for the nation. Such an opportunity comes along rarely. Not to seize it would be impractical, insensitive and irresponsible. Now is the time to act.

A copy of the draft *Comprehensive Design Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement*, which analyzes the proposed plan and its alternatives may be obtained from

OFFICE OF WHITE HOUSE LIAISON
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
1100 OHIO DRIVE, SW
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20242

Comments on both documents must be received at this address by March 11, 1999. If you prefer e-mail, please send your comments to White_House_Liaison@nps.gov.



The following agencies, which serve as members of the project's Executive Committee, helped develop this draft of the *Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House and President's Park*.

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
Commission of Fine Arts
District of Columbia
Executive Office of the President
Executive Residence at the White House
General Services Administration
National Capital Planning Commission
National Park Service
Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (until April 1996)
U.S. Department of the Treasury
U.S. Secret Service
White House Military Office

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END

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